

How to punctuate dialogue tags and action beats correctly

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9 comments

writing tips

One little thing that drives many editors crazy is incorrect punctuation of dialogue and action beats.

Let's start with a definition:

A **dialogue tag** is a speaker verb such as "Tina said." It tells your readers which character is speaking.

An **action beat** is something a character does.

Example:

"I should be going." Tina edged toward the door.



While dialogue tags and action beats can have the same function—identifying the speaker—they aren't punctuated the same.

PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE

If a line of dialogue is followed by a dialogue tag, use a comma (or a question mark or exclamation mark) before the closing quotation mark. If the first word of the dialogue tag is a pronoun such as *he* or *she*, lowercase it.

Example:

Correct: "I have no idea," she said.

Correct: "Stop!" she shouted.

Correct: "Are you out of your mind?" she asked.

Wrong: "I have no idea." She said.

If the dialogue tag precedes the line of dialogue, use a comma before the opening quotation mark. Lowercase the dialogue tag (unless it's a name, of course).

Example:

Correct: She opened the door and called, "Hello? Anyone home?"

If the dialogue tag is inserted in the middle of a sentence, use a comma before the first closing quotation mark and after the dialogue tag. Lowercase the dialogue tag.

Example:

Correct: "I wouldn't have forgotten the appointment," she said, "if you had reminded me in time."

If the dialogue tag follows a complete sentence and the character continues speaking after the tag, use a period after the dialogue tag.

Example:

Correct: "I have no idea where Thomas is," she said. "I haven't seen him all day."

PUNCTUATING ACTION BEATS

Unlike dialogue tags, action beats are always separated from the dialogue by periods.

Verbs such as *smiled*, *grinned*, *laughed*, etc., are action beats, not dialogue tags, so please don't use commas to separate them from a line of dialogue.

Example:

Correct: "This looks weird." She squinted down at her steak. "Can BBQ sauce go bad?"

Wrong: "This looks weird," she squinted down at her steak. "Can BBQ sauce go bad?"

THE SHORT VERSION

Use commas with dialogue tags and periods with action beats, and your editor will love you forever (or at least not curse your name)!